12-17-1986

Long climb to the summit

University of Montana--Missoula. Office of University Relations

University of Montana
Office of University Relations • Missoula, Montana 59812 • (406) 243-2522

MEDIA RELEASE

Dec. 17, 1986

THE LONG CLIMB TO THE SUMMIT

By Carol Susan Woodruff
UM News and Publications

April 23, 1976, is a date indelibly etched in Mike Mayer's memory. The evening began like many others, with Mayer belting down some beers, hopping into his new Ford pickup and taking off on a spur-of-the moment trip.

"It used to be, 'What am I going to do tonight besides getting drunk?'" he says of his days as an auto mechanic in Dillon.

What made that night different was that Mayer's luck, sorely tested in the past, finally ran out. On an unfinished stretch of Interstate 15 between Lima and Dillon, he fell asleep at the wheel and sent his truck hurtling into an embankment.

The Ford rolled. Mayer, thrown clear of the truck, broke his neck. Within seconds, he was transformed from an able-bodied 20-year-old into a quadriplegic who'd be confined to a wheelchair the rest of his life.

As Mayer describes his wilder days, it's hard to believe he's talking about himself. He seems too quiet, too gentle to be the subject of such stories.

- more -

There's a good reason for this contradiction. In the 10 1/2 years since his accident, he's undergone a metamorphosis: from a college dropout to a University of Montana graduate in classics; from an auto mechanic to an administrator at Summit Independent Living Center in Missoula; from a severely depressed patient in a nursing home to a vital 30-year-old who's come to terms with his disability.

These and other major changes haven't come easily. It's taken Mayer a lot of time, determination and help from others to transcend his body's limitations and meet an increasing number of mental and physical challenges.

Mayer began his recovery filled with determination. When his neurosurgeon at Missoula General Hospital told him his paralysis would be permanent, Mayer scoffed at him. "I told him he was nuts and that I was going to walk out of there," he says.

He had some reason for optimism. Only six months before, another car accident had left him with a broken neck that healed in 10 weeks. He'd been extremely lucky to recover. "The bones I broke the first time were the bones they try to break in an ideal hanging," he says.

This time was different. Besides breaking his neck, Mayer injured his spinal cord. The resulting paralysis left him with no use of his legs and minimal use of his arms, wrists and hands. Three operations have given him increased use of his right arm

and hand.

After eight months in Missoula and Ogden, Utah, hospitals, Mayer finally understood he'd never walk again. The knowledge devastated him and his family.

"It was really a heart-wrenching thing," says his mother, Anna Jeanne Moss, a rancher in Lima. "It took me about three months to accept it for what it was. I began encouraging him to do what he could with what he had."

But no amount of encouragement could rouse Mayer from his despondency. After finishing his rehabilitation program, he languished in nursing homes in Salt Lake City and Dillon for 1 1/2 years.

"I vegetated," he says. "It was my way of copping out. I didn't feel comfortable being in the wheelchair and being around other people. You get into a vicious cycle of feeling sorry for yourself."

When friends would ask him to a movie, he'd find an excuse for not going. "It gave me more reason to feel sorry for myself. I could say, 'I never get to go anywhere.'

"I'd always been very active -- hunting, fishing, basketball, football, motorcycling," Mayer says. He thinks he still holds the long-jump record at Lima High School. "I had defined myself that way for 20 years, and all of a sudden that self-image no longer fit. I kept looking at the things I

couldn't do rather than what I could. If I couldn't play the game my way, I didn't want to play at all."

Just as Mayer hit rock bottom, a counselor from the state Vocational Rehabilitation Services division arranged for him to take a series of aptitude tests. His results inspired the division to offer to help put him through college.

Several disabled University of Montana students urged Mayer to attend UM. "It was kind of a powerful thing," he remembers. "You can't sit there and say, 'I can't do it' when you can see that other people are doing it."

Mayer entered UM in 1978. With scholarships and with financial aid from Vocational Rehabilitation, he finished his bachelor's degree in classics in 1983 -- quite a turnaround for a man who'd dropped out of Weber State College after two party-filled quarters of majoring in automotive engineering.

He says he thoroughly enjoyed his studies at UM, despite the difficulty of getting into some campus buildings, propelling his wheelchair over snowy sidewalks, and having to write and type using splints. Molded plastic cuffs that slip over his knuckles, the splints hold either a pen or the pencils Mayer uses to strike typewriter keys.

"I can't say enough about UM's foreign language department," he says. "They really care about their students, and they make the learning process fun and meaningful."

One of his favorite professors, John Hay, has high praise for Mayer, too. "He was the best student in Greek and Latin we've ever had," he says. "He rarely made a mistake and took exams right along with everybody else, with a pencil strapped to his hand. He was an A-plus student."

During his last quarter at UM, Mayer acquired the specially equipped Ford van that's been his ticket to independence. After four months of practice and strengthening exercises, he was driving again. A lift raises him into the van, which has a lowered floor that lets him drive from his wheelchair. With his left hand he works a hand control that operates the brake and gas pedals, and pegs on the steering wheel help his right hand keep a firm grip.

After college, Mayer eased into a career in human services. He began doing volunteer work for the public relations department of Missoula's Community Medical Center, the parent organization of Summit Independent Living Center. Soon he found himself working for Summit, which offers disabled residents of Missoula, Ravalli, Lake and Flathead counties a variety of services aimed at independent living.

The independent-living philosophy stresses a disabled person's abilities and right to direct his life.

Mayer's first task at Summit was examining the Lolo National Forest campgrounds' accessibility to disabled visitors. His

major activity now is coordinating Summit's peer-counseling program, in which people are trained to give disabled clients emotional support, training in disability rights, and information on resources.

"Role modeling, a lot of the time, is the most powerful part of the whole thing," Mayer says. "When clients see that you are managing your life quite well and doing what you need to do, that's a big incentive for them."

Mayer also spends a considerable amount of time on legislative matters affecting the disabled. Last summer, he and three other disabled Missoulians testified before the state Legislature concerning cuts that had been made in the Vocational Rehabilitation budget. The next day, the legislators reinstated those funds.

Since August, Mayer has maintained an unusually hectic work pace. In addition to his normal peer-counseling responsibilites, he now fills the job of Summit's acting director. When he's not organizing or speaking at workshops, he's traveling around the state to set up and monitor counseling programs. Other activities include helping write grants, co-editing Summit's newsletter, and participating in disability-awareness programs for students of all ages.

He recently also served on Priorities for People, a group of Montana human-services representatives who made recommendations

to Gov. Ted Schwinden regarding programs and funding for the state Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

A decade ago, Mayer never would have dreamed he'd be doing such work. Not only was he devoted to cars; he was painfully shy. Far from being able to give speeches, he had his mother or younger brother make his phone calls.

Today Mayer leads a quiet life in his off-hours. In the duplex he shares with a personal-care attendant, he enjoys reading and tinkering with his stereo. Other favorite pastimes are fishing and visiting family and friends. He doesn't drink anymore.

There are days when Mayer wishes his life weren't complicated by a disability. For example, he recently locked himself out of his house, and it took him five hours to get back in. "One thing about a disability that's different from everything else is you never have a day off," he says.

But he's gotten past the point where his disability is the main focus of his life. He says he no longer wakes up every morning thinking, "There's that chair again." He's come to think of his wheelchair as a pair of shoes, something to get around in.

He's learned not to blame his disability for every blue day. And he says, "I don't find myself thinking, 'If only I hadn't gotten drunk and tried to drive to Dillon that night.' I don't do that anymore.

"My life philosophy has changed so much over the years," he says. "I've come to realize that we do have control over our lives. I know that sounds strange from somebody sitting in a wheelchair. I've learned that if you make up your mind, you can do a lot of things. It just might not be in the way you had originally envisioned doing them."

###

CSW
Mayer.rl